

Perspectives of Computational Social Science Assignment 1

Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Time”

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In the Study of “Taste, Ties, and Time”, researchers scraped student data from Facebook, merged it with university records, used this merged data for research, and then shared it with other researchers without informing those students. Those data include the student’s gender, home state, major, political views, network of friends and romantic tastes, race and ethnicity information extracted from photographs and club affiliations, recording of those who appeared in students’ photo albums and cultural tastes like books, music and movies. Thus raised criticism towards it ethics.

According to Salganik’s four principles of ethical research, the researchers of “Taste, Tie, and Time” Study violated the guidance of facing ethical uncertainty.

1. Respect for persons, which means treating people as autonomous and honoring their wishes. That is, Researchers should not do stuff to people without their consent. However, in Taste, Ties and Time study, the researchers used the students’ data without their consent or awareness. Those researchers failure to adhere to ethical research standards (Zimmer 2010) in part because the students had not provided informed consent.

We should notice that, although Facebook is a public online social network, public does not equal consent (Zimmer 2010). Not to mention they even had access to profiles that students might have set to be visible to Harvard’s Facebook network but not to the whole world (Zimmer 2010).

The participants, not the researchers, decide whether this rule is broken. According to the interview of one of the students, She thinks the class should be informed (Parry 2011).

2. Beneficence, which means researchers, should not injure one person regardless of the benefits that might come to others. However, again the Taste, Ties and Time study may expose the student to risk. The risk is raised from the release of

database to other researchers, which created the second-use situation. Someone might be able to figure out individual students' identities, thus may create discrimination and reputational harm towards those students (Zimmer, 2010). To prove this worry, later, those students have been identified as Harvard College's Class of 2009 (Parry 2011). Which can be seen as severe leak of the students' privacy and violation of their willingness.

3. Justice, which means it should not be the case that one group in society bears the costs of research while another group reaps its benefits. However, in Taste, Ties and Time study, it's obvious that those Harvard students of class 2009 bears all the burdens of the research society as a whole benefits. Especially those participants even were not compensated financially (Bit by Bit).
4. Respect for Law and Public Interest. Respect for law includes compliance (attempt to identify and obey relevant laws, contracts and terms of service) and transparency-based accountability (the researchers need to be clear about the goals, methods, and results at all stages of their research process and to take responsibility for their actions). In Taste, Ties and Time study, the researchers obeyed the IRB rules while didn't try their best to identify and obey the terms of service of Facebook. However, they published the results in academic journals enabling transparency-based accountability.

And for the Public Interest, from Taste, Tie and Time Study database, researchers created new knowledge about the social and cultural life of the students and how race and cultural tastes affect relationships (Lewis et al. 2008). And how social networks form (Wimmer and Lewis 2010), how social networks and behavior co-evolve (Lewis, Gonzalez, and Kaufman 2012) etc. However, the research also might cause Chilling effect on social and political life. When people realize that the explosion of their information on Facebook may result in leak of their privacy, they become unwilling to put any of their information online. Including their interests and tastes.

Thus in general, the researchers of Taste, Tie and Time Study might mildly violate the principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest but not as eye

attracting as the first three.

Although the Taste, Ties, and Time database violated the Salganik's four principles of ethical research, I would still use this data for my own research.

The main reason is the database itself is of great importance and interest. It's both complete in details and time continuously. It can be viewed as milestone of how digital age facilitates the social scientists research. Researches published at least three important papers based on it shortly after the data were collected (in 3 years). Those researches focus on diverse topics such as social networks and cultural preference, racial homophile and peer influences etc. Had the database not been closed and had the criticism towards it not that fiercely, the amount of researches must be more amplify.

Besides, I don't think the violation of Salganik's four principles is that severe and it's overemphasized.

1. Respect for persons. I agree that public does not equal consent. But I also agree that alerting students risked "frightening people unnecessarily", according to Kaufman (Parry, 2011). Informing students may increase the risk that those who consent face. The database may shrink and they become easier to be recognized. Besides, those who don't consent may refuse to add those who consent up, for their photo and information may appear on the Facebook page of those who consent. These not only jeopardize the normal social networking of those who consent, but also cause selection bias and manipulation of the database. What's more, when noticing that their online account is watched and is public, even those who consent may choose to hide some information from the researchers or even fake some information thus may compromise the scientific value of the study.
2. Beneficence. Although the Taste, Ties and Time study may expose the student to risk of discrimination etc., these potential harms have never been proved existence. Those are all conjunctions and even if the students are discriminated by the employers, there is anti-discrimination law and the blame should lie on

the employers instead of the researchers. And also, I should point out the database is anonymous and they did do some protection to the students' privacy. Had the criticism not been so vigorous, the attention won't be drawn that much and no one would try to figure out those students are from Harvard College. Thus the source of discrimination may not even exist.

And also, it's hard to define privacy. The spread of information especially in digital age made it even harder. With fast and easy spread, any information we make it at least visible to some groups is actually visible to everyone. People should notice that before post things on the Internet.

3. Justice. I should point out that the students themselves are also part of the society and had they been financially compensated, they would noticed that their information are used for research thus we go back to the problem of principle of respect for persons.
4. Respect for Law and Public Interest. In Taste, Ties and Time study, the researchers obeyed the IRB rules and the terms of Facebook wasn't that clear and complete at that time and the study enables transparency-based accountability. For the Public Interest, as stated above, it draws great public interests and the potential Chilling effect is actually not significant. Today after Hillary Clinton Email Archive exposed by WikiLeaks, we all notice that not only our online account, but also our private phone, email, messages etc. are under supervise of the government. This is much more frightening than Taste, Ties and Time study, but doesn't create much chilling effect until now, not to mention the Taste, Ties and Time study.

Thus, in conclusion, I think it's not a big deal of ethics to use the Taste, Ties and Time database. On contrary, it's of great human welfare in doing so.